

Bug Chasers by Daniel Hill



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Beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there. - Jalal al-Din Rumi

When people are labeled 'abnormal' simply because of their differences, and discriminated against because of those differences, their entire being can become paralyzed. The voice of the mind is stifled, the voice of the heart is oppressed, and the voice of action becomes disabled. For many decades in America, homosexuals have suffered in this way. Homosexuality was not only discriminated against, it was made illegal and labeled a mental disorder.

With the multicultural revolution of the '60s and '70s, we witnessed the beginnings of the arduous task of affirming the rights of oppressed people in our society, including homosexuals. For gay people, a benchmark of success in this movement occurred in 1973, when the "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" (DSM) removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. At last, as gay people, our differences were no longer pathologized and society began to not hold these differences against us, at least institutionally. This was one of the many markers in gay history that enabled us to rediscover our long impotent voices. Even so, there are still those who attempt to pathologize our expressions of love, to minimize who we are as human beings, and who look upon our community only in the context of our 'behavior,' rather than embracing each individual as a member of the human family.

As a gay man living with HIV, I have found it difficult to hold the DSM in my hands, difficult to gaze upon its pages, and difficult to let go of the rage that I felt inside towards a book that was often referenced in the persecution of so many of my gay relations. But in my anger I came face to face with my own resistance-resistance to let

go of the past, to look upon the pages of the DSM with a fresh mind, and to acknowledge the wisdom that this book holds. I recognized that my inability to rise above such a mindset mirrored that of the earlier authors of the DSM. This was a source of tremendous suffering for me.

I often refer to the DSM in this article. I do so not to hold individuals in a pathological 'freeze-frame,' but rather as a tool to recognize particular paths, to understand the complex story of people. I am trying to explore my own resistance to the lives that we bear witness to here. Ultimately, I believe that we are all bound by love and the human covenant to deeply understand such lives.

I must also begin with this disclaimer. The men I refer to as "Bug Chasers" are a very small fraction of the gay community. This article is not meant to sensationalize nor bring harm to my gay brothers. It is only my attempt to understand, embrace and ultimately love them-without want, resistance, or ignorance.

Asking For Help I can remember the demonstrations in San Francisco, I can still feel the heavy sadness, still hear the chanting of the crowds, I can see the placards demanding assistance from the federal government, and I can still smell the burning of thousands of candles in memory of our dead. I can taste the salt of my tears. Our pain, our anger, our isolation, our grief, our hopelessness, and our helplessness brought us together. Help was all we were asking for.

Gay had become the acronym for "Got AIDS Yet?" Out on a date I confided "I am HIV positive." His reply was "Who isn't?" Was it 1983? '84? '85? Was it Castro Street, Market Street, or Civic Center? Was it 10,000, 20,000, or 30,000 marching? This was the dawning of the AIDS community and help was all we were asking for.

Year 2000. In Gay nightclubs across the U.S. men wear sleeveless shirts in hopes that someone will notice the tattoo "HIV-" blazoned across their deltoid. What is not so obvious is that the intention of such a tattoo is to attract someone who is HIV+. It is an invitation to infect through a practice known as "barebacking," having unprotected anal sex. In other words, the tattooed man is intentionally seeking an HIV+ partner to infect him with the virus. All that is left is a trip back to the tattoo artist to have that tattoo adjusted from negative to positive. Simple.

Is help all these men are asking for?

In private sex clubs across the U.S. men gather for a chance to participate in what is called Russian Roulette. Ten men are invited, nine are HIV-, one is HIV+. The men have agreed to not speak of AIDS, nor HIV. They participate in as many unsafe sexual encounters with each other as possible, thus increasing their chances to receive "the bug." These are the men known as 'Bug Chasers.'

Is help all they are asking for?

Suicide or Informed Consent? For most of us, our initial reaction to such behavior is shock. We could assume that men who do this are trying to commit suicide, consciously or unconsciously. We might demonize such behavior by blaming these men for the further spread of AIDS. My own initial reaction was a mix of deep sadness and concern, harsh and bitter judgment, accompanied by a dark fascination and an echo of familiarity. I wanted to see into and label such behavior, perhaps even to pathologize. I wanted to understand what was the fire of my judgment and the coolness of something so familiar. As I began to research, I turned first to the wisdom of psychology to try to understand.

What could cause men to tempt fate so? There are many apparent reasons. Some men report that the element of danger in sexual encounters of this kind adds to the "rush" of arousal. There are men who, once infected, feel like they finally "belong," they are now part of the Gay community. Some find relief in knowing that now they don't have to worry about getting infected any more, the deed is done. Some believe the myth that HIV is a chronic manageable disease and that the new drugs promise them a long and healthy life. Some couples see infection as the deepest level of intimacy.

No doubt any of the above explanations can be put forth as probable cause for such seemingly reckless self-destructive behavior. Yet I find myself stepping back from easy explanations. Generalizations such as these don't speak to me as truth, they merely touch the surface. The truth is that each individual has a different story that leads him to participate in this way. Each story has many layers, and these layers fall somewhere on a continuum between what is deemed 'abnormal' and 'normal' behavior. Although it is convenient to maintain a narrow reactive focus, the fact is that if we truly want to shed light on this subject and to understand, we must use our insight and our

knowledge. "Bug Chasers" are members of the human family and it's important to embrace them as such.

Conscious and Unconscious Intentions In reflecting on the stories of people I know and have read and heard about, it seems to me that Bug Chasing can be both conscious and unconscious. Such intentions seem to manifest differently in two distinct generations of gay men. The older generation are those who have lived through nearly two decades of loss and grief due to the ravages of HIV. The younger generation of Gay men have not been as affected by the multiple losses which have occurred in our community.

In pointing out this difference, I do not mean to minimize the impact of emotions felt by the younger generation of Gay men about such losses. Rather, I choose these two generations as a marker of differentiation because there seems to be two very different themes that play out in participating in unsafe sexual behavior.

The clinical disorders discussed in this article should not be considered absolute—some characteristics overlap into both generations while some disorders are more clearly present in one than the other. And by the way, and perhaps this will be a surprise to some, research reveals that most of these men, regardless of generation, are well informed and educated.

The Unconscious Intention I believe that the "Bug Chasers" of the older generation of Gay men may possibly be suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The diagnostic criteria in the DSM for PTSD is that the individual "has experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury... and that the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror." The DSM also states, "Individuals with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder may describe painful guilt feelings about surviving when others did not survive or about the things they had to do to survive."

Psychologist Walt Odets, in reference to the complex varieties of survivor guilt seen in HIV men, says, "HIV- men tend to be profoundly clinically depressed, anxious, disoriented, hypochondriachal, uncertain about the future, sexually dysfunctional, deeply demoralized and physically numb." He goes on to say that many HIV men "abuse alcohol or drugs, and their physicians prescribe them millions of dollars worth of tranquilizers, sleeping pills, anti-depressants and sedatives every year." Finally,

Odets finds that more and more uninfected men now "live in nearly every detail like a dying man - disoriented, piecemeal, and with no assumption of the future."

My own experience bears this out. In the larger Gay ghettos of San Francisco and elsewhere, I have met older Gay men who have lost all of their friends and avoid developing new relationships. Such men live in a world often characterized by increasing isolation, unresolved anger, substance abuse, and a lack of desire to participate in activities they once enjoyed. I recall some men who were HIV- in the late eighties attending support groups where they openly expressed their hopelessness and alienation as they witnessed their friends, their peers, and their generation die. I have witnessed many such individuals express disappointment and despair that they were still alive. I have heard men say it would have been easier to die with the complications of AIDS because living meant having to learn to cope with multiple loss. Add to all of this the terribly revealing fact that, as Michaelangelo Signorile recently wrote, "far too many gay men say they actually fear growing old in a gay world that puts the young and buffed on a pedestal while treating the over-35 crowd like lepers."

The Intimacy of Bug Chasing For some men, the desire and quest for intimacy is also bundled into this equation of bug chasing. Some men may fetishize the HIV virus, and act in intimate ways to relate to it, while others may feel so 'below' another that they risk their own well being for a fleeting moment of intimacy. In an article in POZ Magazine, Michael Scarce challenges our ideas of what might be considered intimacy when he writes: "Charged Loads...offer a kind of permanent partnership, a connection out-side of time." He quotes an HIV+ man as saying, "It turns me on knowing how much he wants my come and how much he's willing to deal with to get it." Scarce goes on to state that "the sharing of semen and reclaiming its rich symbolic meanings," reflects the desire for intimacy.

Sadly, I am skeptical that sharing of this kind can ultimately bring about the level of ongoing intimacy that these men are searching for.

I do not, however, believe that Scarce is advocating bug chasing, per sé, but is wisely presenting us with an opportunity to examine intimacy beyond our narrow understanding of it. We might think that these men are out of their minds, but that judgement is the measure of our own resistance. We need to explore this resistance if we are to understand more completely these men who are undeniably our own.

Confronting my own negative judgement, I ask myself, "How dare I project my ideas of intimacy onto another." After all, isn't that the same root of oppression towards homosexuality that has occurred throughout this past century?

The Positives of Being HIV Positive Ian Young, in his article *The AIDS Cult and Its Seroconverts*, says that many HIV- men think "HIV positives live richer, more complex, more 'authentic' lives, get more attention, are better able to take risks including, significantly, the 'risk of intimacy' and with such risk-taking, life can be meaningful and full."

I must confess that my own seroconversion (i.e. becoming HIV+) brought about tremendous grief coupled with a wonderful euphoric sense of liberation, of letting go—a liberation that taught me to love again. I know of many men, including myself, who, when they seroconverted, felt as though they were now encouraged to take better care of themselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Coupled with such feelings, many of these same men also felt as though they were finally supported by the community that they once felt so alienated from. Confirming this, Young writes "An HIV+ test result, or even an AIDS diagnosis, frequently results in a decrease in anxiety!"

Reacting with such positive emotions about such a devastating diagnosis seems quite strange at first, like a reversal in the logic stream. But this isn't about logic, it's about very complex psychological and emotional territory. It might be that such positive acceptance of finding oneself HIV positive arises developmentally from previous abnormal conditions. Such conditions might include chronic depression rooted in childhood unhappiness, socially induced guilt, and internalized homophobia. As these conditions develop, the opportunity to fully act out is then presented through barebacking and bug chasing. Seroconversion, in this case, may or may not be the goal.

But it might also be argued that there is a conditioning factor inherent in Gay culture that rewards men for becoming HIV positive, as though it were a rite of passage. If so, this would be a relatively new (within the last 20 years) cultural development, and something that we would do well to bring into the light of consciousness and intention. Is such a self-injurious rite of passage what we want for ourselves? Is it not possible to love and accept one another without having to seroconvert? Without having to die to feel loved?

A More Conscious Intention It is difficult for me to imagine being young and coming into my sexuality after two decades of AIDS, be it gay, straight, or otherwise. My own sexual liberation twenty years ago held no such fears or threats. I did not have to confront the choice of whether or not to adhere to the "do's" and "don't's" of my sexual expression. Such expression was not desensitized by latex, interrupted with "informed" negotiation, nor stalled by the doubt or mistrust of my partner's sexual history. Such expression flowed with the rhythms of the heart and the body, not the ticking of an apprehensive mind.

But young people are coming into their sexuality, every day. HIV and AIDS are not new news. Their consciousness and choices are a world apart from what I and my generation experienced. And, given the world of choices and consequences they face, some choose barebacking and even bug chasing.

I think, for most people, it is very easy to demonize these behaviors. I did. My initial thought was that such men suffer from Antisocial Personality Disorder which, according to the DSM, is characterized by a "lack of empathy and tendency to be callous, cynical, and contemptuous of the feelings, rights, and suffering of others." The DSM goes on to say, "These individuals may also be irresponsible and exploitive in their sexual relationships," and "are more likely than people in the general population to die prematurely by violent means, e.g. suicide, accidents, and homicides." I assumed that these men had no sense of remorse for the harm they commit, not only to others, but to themselves. I imagined an impulsive behavior and a failure to conform to reasonable social norms. I judged them negatively as being sexually irresponsible, exploitive, and cavalier.

Then I read the February '99 issue of POZ Magazine. It was dedicated to the subject of barebacking. POZ editor Walter Armstrong states, in reference to barebacking, "There has always been a strong outlaw element in gay sexuality, this is an extension."

This statement stopped me dead in my tracks. I began to recall the many friends, now dead, who might have been considered sexual outlaws, who might be considered deviant, callous, non-empathetic, or anti-social by those who did not really know them. But I did know them. And was I an "outlaw" as well? As I thought about it, I tried to look more deeply, to understand, and to cultivate the insight I might need to become more compassionate in regards to them, and to myself. As insight and compassion

deepened, that negative judgement about barebacking and bug chasing had to be re-examined.

In light of this, I now view barebacking and bugchasing not as Antisocial Personality Disorder, but more as Self Inflicted Violence, or as I prefer to call it, Self Injurious Behavior. This realization turned the question from "how could someone do that?" to "how can I understand and help?"

Seroconversion as a Rite of Passage As I read through the articles published in POZ, I found the young Gay men who advocated barebacking and bug chasing to be somewhat cavalier. The glamorization, eroticization, and the claims of deeper levels of intimacy made by these men would lead one to believe that they are indeed making informed choices in their sexual behavior. Consider, for example, this plea by Tony Valenzuela. In speaking about the practice of barebacking, he states, "We need to trust that young gay men will be wise in their decisions. They're not passive victims It's a huge disrespect to do otherwise."

Can we trust that young gay men are "wise in their decisions" when they engage in barebacking? If so, are we able to extend such a trust to young gay men who are bug chasers?

I do want to extend the trust that Tony Valenzuela and others ask for. At the same time, I don't accept all of these claims entirely at face value. My fear is that, if I were to do so, I wouldn't be getting to the deeper truth of this issue.

To their credit, bareback advocates are at last speaking out about the behavior that has been quietly hidden away in the closet for the past two decades, and on the surface it is informed. But I believe there are others, not so outspoken, who may be equally informed, but whose intention and experience may be seen in the light of Self Injurious Behavior.

For example, in the summer of 1999 I attended the Gay Men's Health Summit in Boulder Colorado. I recall speaking to a twenty year old man who openly shared with me his feelings of wanting to seroconvert. "I don't know why, I honestly don't know why." Informed, educated, but where is the depth of insight to such desire? What's driving it?

Self Injurious Behavior may have several motivations. From the web site <www.palace.net> I found several points to consider that shed light on bug chasing. Self injurers say that their behavior offers: "escape from emptiness, depression ... relief from intense feelings... an expression of emotional pain ... escaping numbness ... a feeling of euphoria... a relief of anger... a sense of control over one's body... expressing or coping with feeling of alienation."

We're right back to that self-injurious rite of passage. For many men, being gay in the 1990's is equated with being HIV+. Such thinking has divided our community, creating strong feelings of alienation and anger for many who are HIV- . How to heal this rift? By seroconverting, many men believe that they will finally be supported by the community they once felt alienated from.

Michael Scarce writes "barebacking is equated with 'breeding' and infection with 'impregnation.' Some HIV bug chasers have gone so far as to consciously choose the individual gift-giver who will 'father' their HIV infection." Such a rite of passage for some undoubtedly completes their identification with being gay and deepens their role as a member of the community.

I believe many Gay men experience a great deal of internalized shame and anger through awakening to, and acceptance of, their sexuality in a homophobic society. The resulting Self Injurious Behavior paradoxically provides an individual with an opportunity to nurture himself, "to make internal wounds external and to nurture and heal these wounds. . . it is much easier to take care of a visible, tangible wound than to care for internal or emotional damage," according to web site <www.cymax.com>.

Living with the constant fear of becoming HIV+ or dying with complications of AIDS often manifests in internalized anger or feelings of numbness. But, paradoxically, a positive HIV test result can provide relief for the person who has seroconverted. I believe what is being relieved is internalized rage, anger, and the numbness produced by excessive fear. The article Protease Dis-inhibitors? quotes a young man as saying, "That awful waiting is gone ... Maybe now that I am HIV positive, I can finally have my life."

For me, it is not so hard to imagine living in such fear and numbness that one feels as though one doesn't even have a life. As I reflect on my own experience with sincere

honesty, I must say that my life prior to HIV was very lonely and empty. It is as though HIV enabled me to discover the depths of myself and a new depth of connection with the greater human family through all of our suffering, not just my own.

Something Absolute I am the "Bug Chaser." I am every man spoken of in this article. I am the man who has witnessed so many die while wishing that I was dying, too. I was once the hopeless, the depressed, the alienated, the physically numb. I was the one who could care less about the future; the one who felt so below another that I would put my life in jeopardy for that fleeting moment of intimacy. I was the man who slept with infected men, who had unprotected sex with these men, through the haze of alcohol, drugs, desire, and anger. I was the man who demonized my own behavior and hated myself for such behavior. I was the man who was asking for help in so many conscious and unconscious ways. I am the man whose life became full, whose life became meaningful after my seroconversion. I am the man who finally got his life back through a glimpse of liberation when I realized the depths of impermanence. I am the man who wanted to share the intimacy of suffering together and of healing together, and I am the man who knows true intimacy now.

So often we grasp for absolutes, for that which is "right," that which is "wrong," that which is "normal," that which is "abnormal." But in our grasping, we set ourselves apart and bolster ourselves there with what appears to be "fact" or "truth," and our own personal experience. It's a thin security.

I began my research into the behavior of bug chasing by turning to the wisdom of psychology to try to understand. But I have learned that, to get to the whole truth, we must let go of the definitions and the story, let go of the "bug chasers," for ultimately their story is not qualitatively different from the story of smokers, drug addicts, alcoholics and the rest of "us." Their story is little different from those who drive their cars too fast, or choose not to wear a seat belt, or use cell phones that cause brain tumors. Everyone is in the closet about something. The only real difference is the demonization of their behavior-and that's not about "them," it's about us. It is easy to condemn others for what they do, but are we able to own our own self-destructive tendencies, conscious or unconscious? Bug chasers are members of the human race, like everyone else.

I once was taught that when we ask for help, we create the opportunity for love to be

expressed in the world. I think back to the eighties and how we continually asked for help then. It is true that we were often ignored, but it is equally true that we were often heard. I have witnessed a great deal of love manifested in the world in this way. I know how difficult it is for me to ask for help. More often than not, the difficulty is identifying what I need help with and learning to articulate it.

That which is absolute is the truth of our own hearts. That which is absolute is our willingness to look deeply into our own resistance and love what we discover there. In my journey, through researching and writing this article, I have had to come face to face with a tremendous amount of grief, a tremendous amount of self-demonization, a tremendous amount of truth that I had ignored for far too many years. It is difficult to love this part of myself but it becomes easier each time I re-read the words written here. It is through the cultivation of this love that I will be able to love my gay brothers who share this experience with me, and this I know as absolute.

Daniel Hill is a recent graduate of the Naropa University in Boulder Colorado earning a B.A. in Religious Studies and Contemplative Psychology. He currently attends Iliff School of Theology in Denver working towards a Masters in Divinity. He can be reached by eMail.

CULTURAL CREATIVES





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